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ABSTRACT

Ways of increasing awareness of and access to literacy programs for Native people in Toronto, Ontario, were examined. Data were collected through the following activities: a literature review; meetings with stakeholders and the public; surveys of learners, Native literacy workers, executive directors, and steering committee members; and focus group discussions with learners in two Native literacy programs. The findings were synthesized into a model for using a culture-based approach and framework to increase awareness of and access to literacy programs. The model, which was based on the principle of medicine wheel teachings, was based on the following "doors": (1) awareness and vision (awareness of native literacy; building a vision of native literacy); (2) outreach and relationships (learner recruitment, outreach, and referrals; building community partnerships); (3) knowledge and reasoning (ceremony as part of the aboriginal learning experience; the need for relevant learning experiences); and (4) program design and delivery issues (native literacy delivery models; holistic approaches; barriers to access; program needs and funding concerns; program accreditation and articulation). Ten immediate and 14 long-term recommendations for implementing the model were formulated. (The bibliography lists 14 references. Two medicine wheels illustrating components essential to the future of native literacy programs and services are appended.) (MN)

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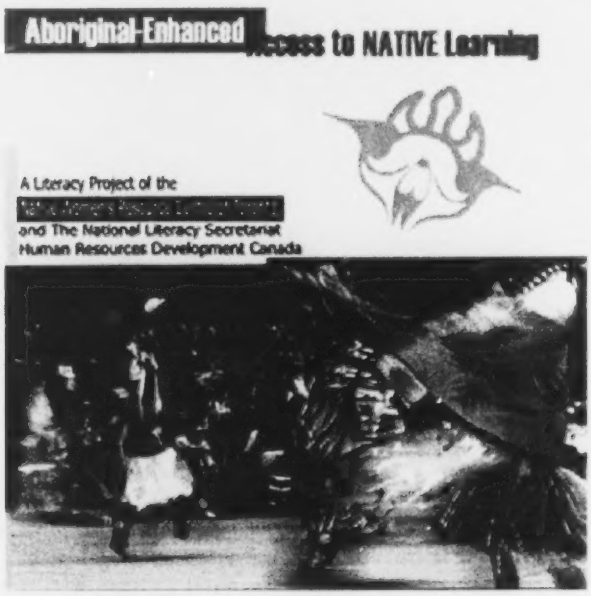
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A Literacy Project of the
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A Literacy Project of
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December 2000

Toronto, Ontario

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FOREWORD

**"...make me wise so I may uncover the secrets
you have hidden in every leaf and rock." (Traditional Prayer)**

In figuring out why Native learners should study the sciences, a Traditional Elder searched for a culture-based explanation for doing so. He recalled reminding a young woman of this line from a well-known prayer. By clarifying the need to pursue literacy, further education and training in a way she could relate to, he offered her a teaching that might inspire her motivation to continue her studies. She invited the elder to her graduation, where she delivered the valedictory address.

Native learners in the Greater Toronto Area face challenges on a daily basis, challenges that must be addressed within a cultural context. The challenges are as diverse as the many nations that exist within the Aboriginal culture. Addressing the challenges successfully is a critical component of any instructor/practitioners' job. There are many secrets and many keys. The secret is being able to unlock secrets. Literacy is a key. The goal of Native learning is to assist learners find the keys for themselves. Having immediate access to various keys empowers learners: brings about respect, inspires goals, etc. Presenting the ability to read as a key to unlocking secrets/worlds may inspire and motivate learners to read.

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In this report, the term "Native" (also the term used in the original report) is used to refer to people indigenous to the Americas or those who identify themselves as being of First Nations background. However, "Native" is also used to include those of Inuit or Metis background.

The use of the word "traditional" when referring to teachers and knowledge is a reference to knowledge and practices rooted in pre-colonial contact. When discussing or comparing something from this ancient knowledge base to modern education systems, today's institutions are referred to as "mainstream," "Western-based," or "government-based."

The words "teacher," "instructor," and "practitioner" are used interchangeably and are used in reference to literacy program staff hired to teach learners in a literacy program.

"Up to the present time, many culturally driven and culturally immersed programs of learning would only be accepted as legitimate training and education as long as they attempted to replicate and professed to have established the same educational definitions and competency standards as those used within Euro-Canadian institutions. This attitude of non-acceptance and the tendency to fund programs which fall into specific and rigid categories of definition has only served to marginalize aboriginal cultural teachings."[1]

[1] Diane Hill, "Aboriginal Access to Post-Secondary Education," March 1995

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This document captures the results of information gathered over the last 12 months during the community needs assessment undertaken by the Literacy Program of the Native Women's Resource Centre. Presented here is information from a wide range of community resources (e.g., learners, literacy workers/practitioners, tutors, and social service agencies serving the Native community) pertaining to the achievement of this project's goals and objectives.

This report will begin by reiterating the project goals as envisioned by the literacy program coordinator at the Native Women's Resource Centre, in conjunction with the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities. As the major project goal is to enhance access to Native literacy programs and services, a brief overview of the background history of Native literacy programs in Toronto is also presented. In the interest of building greater community awareness and in order to foster the continuation of a visioning process regarding the future of Native literacy, information regarding the challenges adult literacy programs face in meeting Ministry of Education funding and program requirements is also provided. The Background Information section concludes with a brief picture of the specific challenges faced by the Native literacy movement in Ontario.

Next follows a report of the needs assessment findings. The data was collected through various channels and is presented using a holistic process of development, in a traditional medicine wheel teaching. Beginning in the east, findings related to awareness and vision are shared first. Moving next to the south, findings related to relationship building are shared. In the west, information regarding knowledge and reasoning as it pertains to the foundation of Aboriginal learning is presented. Then, in the north, where "action" is the key aspect to be considered, data regarding program design and delivery are examined. This section will end with some conclusive statements about the project findings.

Lastly, a series of recommendations resulting from the project findings will be presented. These include suggestions as to what the next steps could be in developing a five-year strategy for Native literacy programs and services in Toronto.

INTRODUCTION

In 1987, when a few Native community members in Toronto first began their involvement with the literacy movement, the challenge before them was to bring about massive improvements in the quality of education for Native learners. They saw possibilities in developing links between Native literacy, healing, community development, and self-determination. This research project rises out of the need to further articulate those hopes and dreams into a collective, community-wide vision.

The numbers of First Nations people who move to Toronto in search of better education and employment opportunities are increasing, and there is documentation verifying that just over half of the Aboriginal population that migrates to the city struggles with poverty. The most recent report describing the situation was presented in October.[°] According to that report, escaping poverty by going back to school rates minimally if at all on a priorities list[2]. In direct response to the economic challenges faced by clients, some Native social service agencies had begun to add literacy, upgrading, training, and job readiness programs to their list of programs and services.

With learners and trainees attending classes and programs that offer support services close at hand, Native literacy practitioners work daily amid the added turmoil of implementing stricter program requirements mandated by their main (and often sole) funder – the Ministry of Training, Colleges, and Universities. Native literacy workers must massage the program to meet the funder's needs, the host agency's needs, the community's needs – and risk losing sight of meeting the learner's needs. It is a precarious balancing act involving one (rarely two) staff, with the occasional extra project added to the load every once in a while. Knowing there is a need for Native literacy programs and finding ways to meet that need is part of the rationale for this project.

The Need for the Project (as per original proposal)

The need for increased access to and awareness of various literacy programs for Native people in Toronto is demonstrated by continuing low literacy levels and high dropout rates from training programs. Given the difficulties in attracting suitable learners to Native literacy programs, our statistics and documentation indicate that we are accessing no more than 10 per cent of the current potential client base.

In order to make literacy services available to clients who require them, we need to develop combined and innovative access channels. Operating in isolation is no longer an efficient or viable alternative for Native programs, as evidenced by our cost-per-contact hour when compared to non-Native programs. It has become imperative that we develop strong linkages and partnerships with other community stakeholders. This will increase the effectiveness of outreach efforts, while decreasing cost per contact hour. This ambitious undertaking will be considered successful only if we conclude with a series of recommendations that provide for continued increased access and awareness, and programs that meet and address the needs of Native learners. Our MTCU field consultant, who has also emphasized the increasing need for such a strategy to meet the needs of the community, has in part directed the development of this project.

[°] "Urban Aboriginal Child Poverty: A Status Report on Aboriginal Children and Their Families," Ontario Federation of Indian Friendship Centres (OFIFC), October 2000

[2] Ibid, page 26.

Who Will Benefit From the Project?

The target group that will benefit are the presently unaccessed, adult Native learners residing in the Toronto area. We have determined that a vast number of learners not presently accessing Native literacy programs, are, for the most part, not accessing the community at large – i.e., they do not utilize the services of Aboriginal organizations in the downtown core (which is where Aboriginal organizations reside in the Toronto area). The recruitment of these new adult learners to literacy programs will produce an additional learner benefit in that literacy programs will provide an opportunity for more cohesive integration into the community at large. In addition, various stakeholders in the Native community will also benefit as a result of an integrated system of outreach access and assessment. These could include training programs, our funding base, community and service agencies, employment agencies, and the Native community.

PROJECT GOALS (as per original proposal)

This project's aim is to guide the development of a strategy for the coordination of culturally appropriate Native literacy services in Toronto. Its purpose is to:

- enhance coordination, articulation, and transition between Native literacy programs and other community stakeholders;
- support the development of partnerships in developing and delivering Native literacy services; and
- improve the definition and availability of distinct Native literacy programming throughout Toronto.

These goals will be achieved through the following key objectives:

- conduct a comprehensive literacy needs assessment of and report on the Native population in Toronto;
- facilitate focus groups and appropriate community meetings on Native literacy in Toronto and record the results;
- identify the gaps, overlaps, and priorities in the development of Native literacy outreach, referral, and access services, assessment and delivery models, partnerships, and coordination of efforts and resources including the coordination of the five LBS services;
- develop a vision for Native literacy service delivery in Toronto, to be drafted into the MTML Literacy Services Planning process, and build in processes to ensure implementation and evaluation of the strategy;
- develop and circulate a five-year strategy for coordinated Native literacy services; and
- address in a positive manner the territorial challenges associated with splintered funding issues.

This project report should not be considered an evaluation of any of the Native literacy programs mentioned. Our hope was to find ways to enhance the coordination of Native literacy programs and bring about partnerships that would benefit Native learners wherever they are in the city. Ultimately, the goal is to ensure that implementing the recommendations will enhance a learner's access to Native learning opportunities.

METHODOLOGY

As soon as this project received official approval from the Ministry of Education and the National Literacy Secretariat, an advisory group was formed. After hiring the initial project coordinator, the group did not meet again but maintained awareness through various communications channels, in order to continue guiding the research process.

The original plan and timeline was twice revised, as the first project coordinator was not hired until December 1999. Dawn Maracle worked on the project from mid-January to mid-September 2000. Sally Gaikezheyongai was hired to complete the project. An extension to January 31, 2001 was granted to allow for completion of the final report.

The first project coordinator developed three survey questionnaires: for learners, practitioners, and executive directors/steering committee members. Literacy workers in attendance at two Wednesday-morning meetings held in October noted that the learners' questionnaire could be rated as being at literacy level 5 replete with the jargon used by literacy practitioners, although staff at Native Women's had added pictures and symbols to somehow improve readability. It is possible that this contributed to our receipt of fewer completed learner surveys. Given that the questionnaire had been in use for 10 months, it continued to be used in order to provide consistent data.

The Data Collection Process

For a period of 12 months, data was collected through the following methods:

- a review of literature pertaining to Native literacy and adult learning principles;
- meetings with stakeholders and members of the public;
- surveys from learners (current, past, and potential);
- two focus-group discussions with learners at two Native literacy programs;
- surveys and interviews with current and former Native literacy workers;
- surveys with executive directors and steering committee members; and
- a community meeting held as part of a visioning process.

At least 60 different people were consulted throughout various stages of this project. Some people contributed to this process in more than one way. Anonymity was assured to anyone contributing information in any forum, in order to facilitate frankness. While the voices included here are predominantly female, males did add their voices to this project throughout the various arenas, in smaller numbers.

In addition, data was collected from 39 surveys including 24 past/present/future learners, 11 past or present literacy practitioners, and 5 Native agency representatives. Both Native literacy program sites (NWRC and Council Fire) hosted a focus group. The participants consisted of a total of 4 practitioners and 6 learners. Ten interviews were conducted with various interested key stakeholders. Two meetings were conducted with several other literacy workers who wanted to participate in the discussion of the initial findings of the needs assessment and wanted to help with the outreach for the community meeting. Finally, a community meeting was held, attracting 8 attendees: 6 literacy workers and 2 learners.

This report integrates data from 32 Native learners, 23 practitioners, and 5 Native agency representatives. Proportionally, then, 56 per cent of the responses were from learners, 37 per cent from practitioners, and 7 per cent from representatives of Native agencies not directly involved in Native literacy programs.

Expected Results of the Project (as per original proposal)

Immediate

- Greatly increased awareness of, support for, and participation in Native literacy services in Toronto.
- Initiation of partnerships addressing an inter-agency strategy.
- Development of a commonly understood protocol for assessment and referral.
- A clearly proposed and prioritized list of recommended initiatives (projects, new positions, avenues for funding and other resources).
- The development and circulation of a five-year strategy with recommendations for effective and efficient delivery of Native literacy programs in Toronto with details of information shared by all stakeholders in the project.

Long-term

- A foundation for innovative partnerships and shared resources.
- Coordination of access channels through a common protocol.
- Increased choice for learners and potential learners.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

The History of Native Literacy Programs in Toronto

Host Organizations

The first Literacy programs in the Greater Toronto Area were established thirteen (13) years ago at Council Fire and Native Women's. Since then, most Native literacy programs have been located in a host agency. The literacy programs operate under the expectations of their predominantly social-service agency hosts as part of the services they offer to the urban Native community. Under these expectations, relations between Native literacy program providers have been either very limited or project-based. While this environment provides a wide range of support services to learners, it also leads to Native literacy programs becoming narrowly defined, as detailed by the host organization e.g., serving women only, residents only, youth only, etc.

Over the 13 years, various organizations have either hosted or delivered Native literacy programs and services, including special or short-term projects. These have included:

- Anduhyaun
- Anishnawbe Health Toronto (Biindiged Program)
- Council Fire Cultural Centre

- First Nations School
- Native Canadian Centre of Toronto
- Native Child & Family Services
- Native Men's Residence (Na-Me-Res)
- Native Women's Resource Centre
- Pedahbun Lodge
- Sistering
- Spirit of the People
- The Meeting Place (St. Christopher House)
- Toronto Board of Education (which sponsored the First Nations Adult Education Project and hosted two Native language programs in the downtown area)

All of these programs worked in partnership to deliver literacy classes as part of the First Nations Adult Education Project (FNAEP) from 1993 to 1999, coordinated through the Toronto Board of Education. Na-Me-Res hosted a Native literacy program for about six years, from 1989 to 1995, and was involved with the FNAEP project during its last two years. Aside from the four major players – Na-Me-Res, Native Women's Resource Centre, Council Fire, and the Native Canadian Centre – all other places listed above have been temporary hosts for the First Nations Adult Education Project and the one-year, Mobile Literacy Services Project.

Program Funding

Currently both Council Fire and the Native Women's Resource Centre receive annual funding from the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities and have been able to offer literacy programs on a full-time basis. Additionally, MTCU provides training support funds to assist with travel and childcare costs for learners. These funds are not directly available to the learners, but are made accessible through the provision of TTC tokens so learners can use public transportation to and from the program and to cover the cost of providing childcare on site while the learner is attending the program.

There are no funds to cover the cost of refreshments or meals to learners, even though this is recognized as a primary need for most learners. Other host agency programs at both Council Fire and the Native Women's Resource Centre provide these necessities.

Aside from MTCU core funding, there are very few alternative avenues through which Native literacy programs/services can secure funding. Within the Greater Toronto Area, all mainstream adult literacy programs are allocated one bulk funding allotment, out of which a portion is designated for the Native stream. Any and all Native literacy programs vie for funding to provide increased service, however the bulk allotment remains a constant. As stated in the original proposal, a splintered funding base is one of the primary challenges to program enhancement deterring the creation of additional programs to serve learners outside the downtown core.

Since MTCU has implemented the development of a centralized Literacy Planning Process for all of Toronto, more pressure is felt by Native literacy programs to account for their higher cost-per-contact hour. The threat of a portion of program operating dollars can drive host agencies to scramble up stats in a bid to hold on to their share. Learners are constantly reminded of the need to sign in and

out of literacy program activities. Ensuring there are enough learners to maintain 'acceptable' activity levels is a funding criterion that determines access to mainstream funds. That criterion played a large part in the Toronto Board of Education's decision to shut down the First Nations Adult Education project; too low attendee levels to substantiate the cost of program delivery.

Periodically, the Native Women's Resource Centre receives additional funding for specific limited duration projects. In the past few years we have created and published adult learning booklets, produced and presented a "stay-in-school" play with the students of First Nations School, produced a family literacy manual and provided a Mobile literacy service. These projects have been funded through various sources: Canadian Give the Gift of Literacy Foundation, the Ontario Ministry of Citizenship and Culture and; the majority through the Native Literacy Secretariat in partnership with the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities.

Learner Recruitment, Assessment, Training, and Referral

The two current Native literacy programs are independently responsible for conducting their own learner outreach, assessments, and referrals. This has not always been the case. In 1989 or 1990, all three then-existing Native literacy programs formed a Circle of Learning and worked collaboratively to provide support to each other. It was based on this partnership that all three programs became involved in the First Nations Adult Education Project in 1993. All three programs took turns recruiting learners and hosting classes, this allowed for all three to become familiar with assessing, training, and conducting referrals with/for the same group of learners. Host agency expectations, a splintered funding base and the urgency to increase the client base have restricted these activities. Perhaps the struggle to achieve increased funding levels has led to the development of a territorial perspective toward learners, rather than a shared outcome-based partnership.

As long as each host agency remains women only, men only, or youth only, each program location recruits and assesses only those who will be welcomed at their location. Learners are forced to meet specific criteria or be referred elsewhere to a location where their comfort level may not provide an optimal learning environment. Each group of learners then works largely in isolation. Very few learners make the transition from one program to another unless supported by another need/program. If a learner has contact with another host agency with respect to a specific support service offered by that agency, a non-literacy related program provision, that learner may transfer to literacy programs at that particular agency. This situation underlines the need for Native literacy programs to develop an inter-agency strategy to more effectively serve Native learners in Toronto.

Staff Recruitment and Training

There is no accredited college program or university degree that specifically qualifies or graduates a Native literacy program coordinator/practitioner. As a result, it is up to the host social-service agencies to determine what constitutes an adequately knowledgeable and skillful Native literacy worker. Determinant factors may include the following: interpretation of Native literacy (e.g., traditional or Western-based approach), goals and aspirations of Native literacy (e.g., further mainstream education and/or work-orientation/employment or self-determination/actualization),

ability to comprehend and meet funders accountability measures, ability to produce outcomes and independent motivational factors for working in the filed of Native literacy.

Over the past 13 years, like other social service agencies with front-line workers, some Native literacy programs have experienced a large turnover of staff. At the same time, securing the position of a literacy program coordinator is one of the few positions that can offer the successful candidate long-term, employment - in comparision to short-term contract social service agency positions. While the majority of literacy program staff have been Native, at times, there seemed the need to hire non-Native workers to fulfill the task, yet-again, of educating Native learners. This speaks more about the hiring strategies of the host agency than it does about the availability of trainable Native community members.

Training for Native literacy workers is not readily available. Native literacy practitioners throughout Ontario have expressed a need for training and professional development. Training, in the form of workshop sessions is regulary made possible through the Metro Toronto Movement for Literacy, which is the LLC for the Greater Toronto Area, and by the Ontario Native Literacy Coalition. Budgetary restrictions on the annual literacy funding do not lend themselves to incoporate professional development dollars. If the ONLC did not provide financial assistance to practitioners to attend their training sessions, very few practitioners could attend. Training occurs once or twice per year and is often developed around enhancing literacy staff understanding of MTCU requirements, how to meet them and the various elements of program reform.

As literacy programs consider the development of inter-agency strategies, one of the realities to consider is the involvment of non-Native practitioners, tutors and volunteers. Some Native community agencies promote empowerment of Native people only by other Native people, to provide role models. All Native agencies strongly advocate for the empowerment of Native learners within a supportive environment, developed through a holistic approach to education that embraces the life-long learning concept. Most agencies, operate on a principle of program provision in a culturally appropriate manner, by Native staff and volunteers whenever possible. Because social service agencies tend to see the most marginalized members of the Native community, every effort is made to refrain from increasing the burden of Native clients by subjecting them to less than empowering approaches. This is mentioned because, as inter-agency partnerships are pursued, non-Native literacy staff may find themselves unwelcome at the table where terms and conditions of involvement are laid out. When the Mobile Literacy Services project was in operation, for example, one Native agency stipulated that the field instructor(s) had to be Native or the program would not be offered at all.

According to Aboriginal cultural and spiritual beliefs, embracing all "brothers and sisters" is the ideal standard, but it is not yet commonly accepted as the place where healing and learning begins. Recovery from colonization and its ongoing practices of institutionalized racism, and healing from the residential schools experience are still in effect. Stepping onto the healing path or discovering the "good red road" entails developing the willingness to explore one's social reality and accepting self/identity to assert one's rightful place and purpose in a society that still aims to assimilate First Nations people. The lifelong healing/learning journey must begin without the imposition of mainstream culture; this reiterates a hiring principle we demonstrated earlier. A Native literacy practitioner must have developed the socio-political analyisis required to deconstruct the effects of colonization in order to incorporate anti-racist/anti-oppressive principles and practices into the foundation of a program that embraces and empowers its learners. They must bring such

deconstructive analytical abilities into the sharing of Native history, culture and spirituality in the classroom. They become part of the process of learning; not just directing it as an outside observer.

Tutor Recruitment and Training

Native literacy program coordinators have predominantly been responsible for recruiting their own tutors, preferably from within the Native community. NWRC partners with First Nations House at the University of Toronto, the Native Student Support Council at George Brown College, and the Native liaison at Ryerson Polytechnical Institute. Efforts to establish a bank of tutors are also supplemented through a long-standing partnership with Frontier College. As the overall recruitment process results in a predominantly non-Native group of volunteer tutors, cross-cultural training is an important feature of the tutor training delivered.

Program Delivery Methods Used

The two current Native literacy programs are available free, full-time on Monday to Friday, from nine to five. NWRC used to provide extended access to service on Wednesday evenings from five to nine. There is currently no accommodation for learners who are unable to access service during the day, nor to assist college students or youth with homework assignments, nor offer evening access to introductory computer usage.

Actual individual tutoring is focused primarily on basic literacy (reading, writing, English, and math) up to level 5 (grade 9). Group learning activities usually focus either on the development of creative writing skills or a basic comprehension of fractions, two repeated requests from our client base. From time to time, adult learners currently enrolled in mainstream educational institutions require assistance, mainly with enhancement of writing skills. Most agencies do provide assistance with transportation and will provide paper, pens, or notebooks, along with photocopied lesson materials.

Minimal assistance is provided on site with the creation of résumés, cover letters, and other job-search-related activities. However, this is limited, as MTCU guidelines do not define these as purely LBS activities.

Access to childcare is problematic as no agency can support a full-time caregiver. Arrangements for on-site childcare provision can be made if learners provide advance notice. It is easiest to ensure a provider is on-site during specific workshops.

As stated earlier, learners attending the literacy programs at Council Fire and the Native Women's Resource Centre can also access basic necessities on an emergency basis, e.g., meals, food, clothing, diapers, and formula, from the host organization.

Both programs are insistent with respect to the incorporation of Aboriginal culture-based approaches and Native-specific materials whenever possible. Several practitioners have developed learner-generated material with small groups of learners. Each program has developed its own library of books and resource materials. Both programs receive generous loans of adult literacy materials

through the Toronto Public Library, Literacy Deposit Collection. The AlphaPlus Centre is also helpful to Native literacy programs throughout Ontario. It provides access to its' extensive library, they host orientations for new learners to the library, and they also provide the services of a Native-specific field consultant. The consultant fulfills many identified gaps in service. She assists with training, curriculum selection, and field communications with other literacy programs.

During the past thirteen (13) years of MTCU funded Native literacy programs and services in the city of Toronto, the following delivery methods have become common practice:

- **Drop-in literacy services** - provides information and referrals regarding educational and/or training programs for adults, job-related assistance such as résumés and cover letters, assistance with learning how to use available computers e.g., to write an essay, surf the Net, send e-mail, also provides for initial intake and assessemtns, and basic program information sessions.

- **One-to-one tutoring** – which is deliverd by staff, volunteer tutors, or peer tutors.

- **Supervised learning** – learners study independently on or off-site; the practitioner develops a training plan with the learner to gradually increase their literacy level in specific areas of need at a pace set by the learner; this can be supplemented by weekly tutoring sessions.

- **Small-group literacy** – includes: Native language classes; poetry or creative writing circles; reading nights (with various published Native authors); English and math upgrading classes; job-readiness groups; support circles; exercise classes; educational outings, e.g., school and college tours; outings to cyber cafés; attending plays written and performed by First Nations people; exposure to cultural experiences and ceremonies e.g., teaching circles, powwows, visiting the Peterborough petroglyphs, which are followed by various literacy exercises.

- **Special projects** – have included a moms 'n' tots program, regalia-making classes, creation of a community-based newsletter providing a forum for learners work to be published, design of program flyers, assistance with the development of curriculum workbooks, evaluation of Native literacy learning materials, writing contests, and assistance with the promotion of Native literacy at community gatherings and book fairs.

Historical Timeline

Spring 1987 — The Native Women's Resource Centre and Council Fire deliver full-time literacy programs and services to the Aboriginal community for the first time. The NWRC program serves women and their children. Council Fire serves men, women, and their families on site and offers literacy instruction to Aboriginal inmates at the Don Jail, two area detention centres, and a correctional institute. Program coordinators conduct independent recruitment but collaborate on tutor training sessions.

1989 — Na-Me-Res receives funding to provide a literacy program part-time for a full year. They serve primarily the male residents on site but are open to the public, to both male and female learners.

Council Fire adds an Ojibway class and a beading class to their literacy program. They receive six computers with printers, thereby adding computer literacy to their program. The program then restricts itself to working with inmates at one correctional institution due to transportation problems.

The NWRC offers classes in traditional dance and regalia making, producing its first literacy booklet, which is based on these learning experiences. They also run a moms 'n' tots program as a family literacy initiative.

All three existing Native Literacy programs unite in the formation called the Circle of Learning. In addition to operating programs at three locations, they discover various ways to share information and provide support to each other. They co-host a well-attended Native literacy social in 1990.

1990–1991 Native literacy program staff have the opportunity to attend the first province-wide training course for Native Literacy workers, offered by the First Nations Technical Institute and certified through Loyalist College. In addition to maintaining full-time literacy programs, staff attend the course part-time. During this period the NWRC publishes two more literacy booklets: *Niibna Bgidnigewenan – The Many Gifts* and *The Sacred Home*.

1993–1999 a) The Adult Basic Education Unit of the Toronto Board of Education undertakes the First Nations Adult Education Project (FNAEP). They begin by offering adult literacy classes for male and female Aboriginal learners at Na-Me-Res and the Bickford Centre. All three literacy programs continue to operate in addition to supporting and staffing this initiative.

By 1995, classes at Na-Me-Res and the Bickford Centre are no longer offered. Instead, the Toronto Board of Education hires an Aboriginal coordinator who hires two to three Aboriginal literacy instructors to deliver classes part-time; once a week at Anduhyaun, the Meeting Place, Native Canadian Centre, Native Women's Resource Centre, and Sistering. The literacy program at Na-Me-Res comes to an end.

b) A number of community members receive 30 hours of training to receive certification as Native literacy workers. The Toronto Board of Education runs these classes out of the Bickford Centre and the former AlphaPlus Centre. However, by the fall of 1999, the interest, funding, and support for a separate literacy program wanes, and the FNAEP project ends.

c) The Native Women's Resource Centre continues to expand their provision of Literacy programs and services. In addition, culture-based curriculum is developed and published: Sweet Grass Road; Arts and Crafts of the First Nations People of the West Coast; Arts and Crafts of the First Nations People of the East Coast and the Four Directions Cookbook. The NWRC offers an 'extended access to services' program and offers introductory computer classes. New partnerships are developed with the First Nations House at the University of Toronto and with Spirit of the People. The First Nations House partnership is comprised mainly of referrals, while the Spirit of

the People partnership allows the NWRC to serve their clients by providing literacy classes weekly at their downtown location.

1998–1999 Ongoing Native Literacy programs continue at both NWRC and Council Fire. The Native Women's Resource Centre receives funding for a special project that allows us to hire a part-time coordinator/instructor to deliver mobile literacy services for one year. Agencies that became the host sites for weekly literacy classes were: Biindiged Program of Anishnawbe Health Toronto, Native Child & Family Services Youth Drop-In, Pedahbun Lodge, and Spirit of the People. During this time, NWRC also hires a researcher to produce a manual, which guides the development of Native Family Literacy.

1999–2000 In addition to the continuation of all LBS funded activities, literacy program staff at both NWRC and Council Fire attend the first National Aboriginal Literacy Gathering in Morley, Alberta. NWRC receives special project funding to hire a researcher to conduct a needs assessment and develop a five-year strategy for coordinating Aboriginal literacy services in Toronto. The NWRC also hosted their first ever Literacy Departmental Visioning Day, attended by just under sixty people, made up of past and present learners, tutors, and representatives from Frontier College and NWRC staff. The results of this days' activities was presented in a report at the national conference in Morley, Alberta as an example of conducting a culturally-appriopriate program evaluation.

The Aboriginal-Enhanced Access to Native Learning project also acknowledges that various Aboriginal agencies in Toronto already deliver programs that include aspects of literacy, academic upgrading, training, and job-skills development. However, to our knowledge, none of their programs or projects receives MTCU funding specifically geared to the delivery of LBS programming.

MTCU Sponsorship of Native Literacy Programs

What follows is a description of the funding requirements to secure MTCU operating dollars.

MTCU Program Specifications

Over the past 13 years of Native literacy programs in Toronto, development and delivery has been dependent on the MTCU for literacy and basic skills (LBS) funding. All LBS programs are primarily aimed at learners who are long-term unemployed, to assist them in moving toward employability and independence with a special emphasis on recipients of social assistance. Programs are, however, also open to employed learners who need/want to improve their literacy skills in order to maintain or upgrade their work skills.

LBS program objectives include:

- To help Ontario move toward a seamless adult education system that supports lifelong learning
- To support literacy agencies in providing quality services that meet learners' needs
- To focus literacy services on those adults most in need of them

- To ensure accountability to government, to the public, and to learners in the provision of literacy services that are effective, efficient, and produce measurable results
- To foster closer links between literacy training and employment

MTCU determines the learner eligibility for participation in the LBS program. Under their criterion, individual delivery agencies further determine who they serve and how they will articulate the plans developed by the Local Literacy Services Planning Process, which in Toronto is the Metro Toronto Movement for Literacy.

MTCU criteria require that a learner be:

- Without the literacy skills necessary to find and keep a job or to meet everyday needs
- At least 19 years old
- Out of school

In order to comply with core funding requirements, Aboriginal literacy programs must predominantly be accessible to learners who fit within these criteria. Adults whose literacy skills are assessed to be above the grade 9 level are to be referred to other adult upgrading or training programs available in the community. Children, youth, and family literacy may not seem to be of immediate concern under the current government definition. The challenges with which all Native litetheir studies in a Native literacy program. Of main concern to MTCU are literacy programs that enhance school-based literacy, workplace literacy, and those literacy programs that offer an introduction to computers, and which generally increase the "employability skills" of learners.

Funding for literacy programs is obtained primarily through the Literacy and Basic Skills Program of the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities on an annual basis, although multi-year funding models are now in place for several organizations. Annual business plans are filed pending approval of the Ministry and based on the Native literacy programs' participation in the local Literacy Services Planning Process. Goals are set a year in advance to determine 'contact' hours and activity levels of each program in the city. At each year-end, programs report to what degree they have met their projections in accordance with MTCU standards. Additional funding for limited duration projects can be obtained through the National Literacy Secretariat.

LBS Functions and Services

The LBS focus their concerned on the functions of service delivery and service development. The five basic components that must be included in the service delivery of every literacy program funded by MTCU include:

1. Information and referral
2. Literacy assessment
3. Training plan development
4. Training
5. Follow-up

The LBS service development functions refer to activities that support and improve literacy agencies' delivery of services to learners. These include:

1. Support for local planning and co-ordination
2. Field support
3. Research and development

There are four to six performance indicators for each of these three service development components. The MTCU field consultant seeks documented evidence of each component at each site. The performance indicators are outlined very specifically in the MTCU publication, "Literacy and Basic Skills Program Guidelines," from which much of this information has been drawn.

The guidelines for the development and delivery of LBS programs came into effect in April 1999. They are directly from the Literacy and Basic Skills Section of the Workplace Preparation Branch of the Ministry of Education and Training, which is now the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities. At the same time, MTCU also instituted the use of a Learning Outcomes Matrix, one of the largest hurdles for practitioners coping with the various elements of program reform.

LBS Learning Outcomes Matrix

The reason MTCU funds over 200 literacy programs in Ontario every year, is to assist more than 60,000 adults in: attaining employability, preparing themselves for further education and training, and; actualizing their independence.

All adult literacy programs funded by MTCU are expected to measure and document the progress of learners according to a standardized set of learning outcomes. This is a step toward developing a recognition of adult learning programs and leading eventually, toward formal accreditation of adult learners, which allow for a smoother transition from one program to another, to other kinds of programs, or to other educational, training or employment pursuits.

The LBS Learning Outcomes Matrix identifies a progression of five different levels of learning, listing specific measurable learning outcomes for each level. The final goal is not necessarily for learners to obtain a grade 12 level in the shortest timeframe possible. Remember that the MTCU funding criteria mentioned earlier specify that literacy programs must focus on "learners who fall below level 5 or grade 9."

Literacy programs can only assist learners in reaching for that goal up to a certain level, then the rest falls back to the learner. Literacy programs can help to prepare adult learners to make the transition to the next level of learning: adult upgrading (which can cover grades 9 to 12). Host agencies, literacy staff, or learners inadvertently referring to literacy programs as adult upgrading programs, in order to decrease the social stigma still associated with identifying as being illiterate, only creates/adds to the confusion in the community regarding the possible benefits of participating in an adult literacy program.

Using the Learning Outcomes Matrix as the basis of evaluating learners and their progress pulls literacy program staff/instructors away from their teaching activities and toward administrative duties connected to each of the five components of services. Administering each component basically requires, in the words of one practitioner, "documentation, documentation, and filing more supportive

documentation." Each literacy program coordinator spends a lot of time ensuring their record-keeping practices demonstrate compliance with Ministry guidelines. MTCU have field staff whose job it is to visit each literacy program site to determine that a program is maintaining appropriate accountabilty measures. Often literacy department employees work in anticipation of such visits.

Each literacy program must include the five basic LBS service delivery components:

1. Information and referral

Provide information to those who inquire about the program. Gather informative resources on further educational, training, and employment options available to the learner. Collect specific types of information on each learner for MTCU purposes, e.g., age, last formal grade level achieved, and ensure security of confidential files.

2. Literacy assessment

Determine the best method to assess the learning level of each learner at entry and exit. Developing similar or varied and creative methods of assessing the level of knowledge and skills of a learner may be time-consuming, so assessment may be carried out over several visits as part of an informal intake interview.

3. Training plan development

Develop a training plan with each learner -actual written and filed documents- by establishing with the learner's level of commitment and how much time they are prepared to spend per day or per subject area. Determine the learner's preferred learning style, set up the learning supports required e.g., tutoring, planning of progressive lessons. Training plans also have to be revisited, perhaps revised, and updated as the learner demonstrates progress and articulates altered goals or aspirations.

4. Training

Literacy programs provide the basic math and English instruction. Literacy staff do this themselves, and/or provide the learner with independent study opportunities inclusive of appropriate learning materials required, while supervising their learning. Staff also work closely with tutors to ensure lesson plans are completed and progressive curriculum materials are accessed. Literacy practitioners are also responsible for the design and delivery of workshops and small group sessions as defined by learner request. The recruiting, training, and provision of tutors as learning supports are also part of training delivery. Ensuring learner access to any supportive counseling required, providing public transit fare, and offering childcare on-site during the actual hours learners are attending the program may also be necessary.

5. Follow up

This is often the most neglected area of service delivery perhaps because it is the most difficult to fulfill. Adult learners do not often maintain contact with literacy programs if their studies are interrupted. However, MTCU wants to know "where" the learner went next: further education or

training, employed, or the achievement of "independence." Sometimes, programs can only make educated guesses at this as exit interviews are rarely formally done.

One of the Aboriginal-Enhanced Access to Native Literacy project's goals was to "identify the gaps, overlaps, and priorities in the development of Native literacy outreach, referral, and access services, assessment and delivery models, partnerships, and coordination of efforts and resources including the coordination of the five LBS services." How well each program meets the above MTCU-specific responsibilities is documented and filed in each program's records, and provides the best testimony to how well each program coordinator manages to address these various areas.

For this project, Native learners, literacy practitioners, host agencies, and Native community members were asked about their understanding of these five key components and to comment on the process or quality of application of these components.

Learners' Surveys

Learners were asked:

- to identify how they came to be aware of Native literacy programs;
- to speak generally about their experience of attending such a program;
- to name the literacy services they had used;
- to identify how they were able to support themselves financially while attending the program;
- to identify the various supports and hurdles to their participation in a program;
- to identify whether the program served their "whole person needs";
- if there were enough trained staff and volunteers to help them; and
- to identify if the program seemed to function with enough funding to serve learners' needs.

The questions sought to identify successful access channels as well as gaps in access provision. They were designed to determine the factors that contributed to the success of a learner's journey and to identify barriers to learning, so they could be more effectively addressed. Many questions attempted to gain insight into learners' perceptions of how well Native literacy practitioners were delivering the LBS components. However, as service delivery begins to desintegrate at the follow-up component, learner's transitions to other programs are directly affected. This is the stage where clearly established program accreditation and articulation agreements would best serve the interests of the learner as they expand or continue their learning journey. It is also the area that requires community-wide partnerships.

Practitioners' Surveys

Practitioners were asked:

- to identify how learners found out about literacy services;
- to identify how learners supported themselves while in a literacy program;
- to identify what supports or hurdles affected learner participation;

- whether literacy services served the "whole person" needs of the learner;
- seven questions identifying program funding needs and concerns;
- to identify what literacy services their learners have used in Toronto or those they are at least aware of;
- how they know about learners who have not accessed literacy services;
- how they tried to reach these learners;
- to identify whether there are enough workers and volunteers to help in the program; and
- to identify if the program functions with enough funding to serve learners' needs.

These questions also sought to identify successful access channels and gaps in access Provision. They were also designed to determine the critical components of program success and to identify barriers as experienced by Native literacy practitioners. The diversity of information gathered attempts to gauge how well the five LBS service delivery components are being carried out as evidenced by Native literacy practitioners. Again, service begins to disintegrate with the fifth component. Practitioners are operating in isolation rather than in collaborative partnerships with each other and with other community agencies. Some feel that the pressures to respond to learner needs, ensure administrative accountability both to the funder and the host agency leave little room for the design and development of collaborative efforts. There is a demonstrated need to continue fostering the development of community-wide partnerships, partnerships that have a common vision of the roles and responsibilities of Native literacy programs and services and how those services figure in the general movement of Aboriginal self-determination and toward achievement of Aboriginal self-sufficiency.

Executive Directors'/Steering Committee Members' Surveys

This group of people was asked:

- if they or their organization had a visioning process for determining principles for Aboriginal literacy development and delivery in the Greater Toronto Area;
- if they had any ideas to offer in relation to the first question,
- if they had any inter-agency strategy in place that shared common outreach, assessment, and referral practices as well as for instructor/tutor recruitment and training;
- if they had gathered any information to determine the specific needs of adult Native learners who are not accessing literacy programs;
- if so, whether they were able to share such information;
- if they had any ideas for gathering such information;
- if they or their organization saw any literacy services actively promoted and encouraged through/in organizations not necessarily dedicated to education or mandated for training;
- if they had any preliminary ideas on making access to literacy a Toronto-wide reality;
- if they had any ideas about locating current resources in relation to Aboriginal needs assessments, students, and practitioner needs/services relating particularly to literacy and basic skills;
- how they defined Native literacy;
- what they would include as part of Native literacy;

- what they knew about existing learners' needs and future learners' needs in terms of successful access and retention in the Toronto area;
- what they knew about the financial realities/needs relating to improved access and retention of Aboriginal learners in the Toronto area; and
- if they had any sense of the various programs in the Toronto area that should be working together to increase access to and retention with Aboriginal literacy and LBS programs.

This group of people was asked the most questions (18) about their understanding of the five LBS service delivery components and their impressions of agency efforts to meet and fulfill these components. However, only five executive directors/steering committee members filled the survey.

Two Focus Group Discussions

Focus-group participants included a mix of learners, program volunteers and literacy practitioners at each Native literacy program site. Each group was asked different questions. Based on a summary of the responses recorded for each focus-group meeting, the following general questions may serve as an aggregate. Focus-group participants were asked:

- how they heard about the literacy programs;
- to identify some positives about the programs;
- if the literacy program they were attending suited their holistic needs;
- to comment on the program's use of volunteers;
- to identify some negatives/barriers/access issues;
- to identify when they learned some self-esteem;
- to identify other issues not already mentioned; and
- to prioritize any changes they thought the program needed.

This form of data collection offered a mixture and balance of both positive and negative statements made in relation to the five LBS components. The learners' frank responses, shared in the presence of literacy program providers, indicated their willingness to articulate their needs assertively and clearly. The discussions focused on program delivery and participation, and many participants offered suggestions regarding various aspects of program delivery. However, aside from sharing specific ideas for better outreach and recruitment of learners; no one raised concerns about follow up. No one raised issues surrounding the lack of program accreditation, the need for program articulation agreements to ensure smoother transitions to "next steps," or how an inter-agency strategy might need to be developed to address the literacy needs of the Native community.

The Community Meeting

An agenda was created, but discussions occurred free-flowing in circle. Participants began by introducing themselves and sharing what concerned them the most about the past, present, and future state of Native literacy programs and services in Toronto. The group also heard a medicine wheel teaching presented by an elder. It helped the group reflect on everything that had been shared so far in relation to creating a vision of the future of Native literacy, a vision that would best serve the learners of our community.

Participants spoke about the five LBS components and identified where some of the gaps in service delivery occur or recur. There was unanimous agreement about the next steps:

- to increase greater awareness of and support for Native literacy programs; and
- to initiate and/or continue fostering partnerships that will help build a community-wide visioning process and assist in designing a five-year strategy.

After presenting the medicine wheel teachings to the group's collective heart/mind/spirit, the elder cautioned them to overcome the urge to move immediately to "action" by jumping from the eastern door to the northern door. He reminded them not to neglect the steps in between, and not to forget to take the time in the south to build relationships with potential partners in order to establish relations "in a good way." He also reminded them to turn West to develop respect and understanding of the knowledge and wisdom contained within Aboriginal community resources. The bridge of respect and unity that must be built between the teachers in the east and the learners in the west must not be undermined by the urge to short-cut the process.

Concluding the Background Information Section

The background information section provides a general overview of Native literacy programs and services over the past 13 years in Toronto and also describes the variety of challenges with which they continue to cope. When placed within the wider context of the many changes occuring at the local and provincial level, potential partners and community members garner a sense of the complex nature of developing a strategy that effectively addresses the needs of Native learners in the Toronto First Nations community.

Many Native literacy programs and service providers across Ontario fear the Native streams' eventual diversion and re-assimilation into mainstream literacy. Joining other Native literacy program providers to demand that Aboriginal control of Aboriginal education be a central operating principle of developing and delivering programs often means joining MTCU-funded literacy coalitions.

One of the objectives of this project suggested that developing a five-year strategy for the coordination of Aboriginal literacy services in Toronto meant "removing funding issues from the initial discussions and focusing on common program needs in developing successful client-centred services" and acknowledging that as a place to begin strategizing.

There are serious control issues with respect to how goals will be defined and addressed. This stance is adotped not only by the local Native community, but is based on a history of systemic discrimination. The integrity of Native processes demands that we not rush to meet mainstream teimlines. Rebuilding the sacred hoop of life does not demand we engage in important processes hurreidly or carelessly.

There is a sense that building greater unity with those already established in a broad network of providing social services, education, and training, and who offer a variety of support services, e.g., counselling, would decrease duplication of programs and services and ultimately provide increased cost efficiency. The issue appears to be one of accountability. However, the participants in this

project consider the motivation behind forming partnerships under these conditions somewhat suspect.

Past Native literacy programs and practitioners have suggested in previous reports to Native literacy program funders what a workable Native literacy model might look like.

Recommendations From Previous Native Literacy Projects

1. *The First Nations Adult Education Report*, submitted in June 1994 by the First Nations Adult Education Project team, contains "A New Vision" of eight areas that could by pursued by future projects. Briefly, these include:

   - the establishment of a First Nations Literacy House in Toronto;
   - the development of Native-specific curriculum;
   - researching a model of Native education;
   - more involvement by elders;
   - the development of training models for instructors and tutors;
   - networking with other Native education agencies; and
   - follow-up and network- building of literacy "graduates" and students.

2. Robert Beaton and Nancy Cooper co-authored a document entitled *A Culture-Based Approach to Learning: Addressing the Needs of First Nations Adult Learners in Toronto* while working with the First Nations Adult Education Project in June 1997.

   They offer some "Principles to Consider" when undertaking a literacy initiative for Aboriginal peoples, including the following:

   - Spiritual concerns are an important part of education for First Nations peoples.
   - Distinct Aboriginal styles of thought and communication need to be considered.
   - Literacy has the dual purpose of promoting Aboriginal languages and cultures as well as providing skills and information relevant to the dominant society.
   - Literacy instruction for Aboriginal peoples must take place in an atmosphere that contains both strong group bonds and great individual freedom. The extended family and the community at large are important sources of support, care and assistance, and provides context in the lives of First Nations peoples.

- The health of the community as a whole must be considered along with the health and instruction of the individual.

- Literacy for First Nations people must be service-oriented; knowledge is viewed as a group resource.

3. The "Write On" Mobile Literacy Services Project submitted a report in October 1999 outlining three recommendations to other future/similar projects. These were:

   - that there be continuous delivery of literacy programs and services to Aboriginal adult learners in partnership with Aboriginal agencies that can provide ongoing support throughout the learning process;

   - that, prior to hosting literacy classes, partnership agencies receive orientation and training about the possible literacy needs of their clients and strategize with literacy staff and other community partners in how to effectively support learners' progress; and

   - that curriculum development for Aboriginal literacy programs needs to be recognized as a priority that requires the allocation of adequate staff, time, and resource; not attached as possible by-products of a short-term part-time project.

PROJECT FINDINGS

In order to provide an Aboriginal culture-based framework that would guide the project and community through a visioning process, elder Athol Hart shared some medicine wheel teachings with the participants of the community meeting. He reminded them about the gifts of the four directions and how they described four stages of the process of learning. Looking into this "mirror" provided the literacy workers at the meeting with an opportunity to reflect on how far they had come in their work so far. It also helped them envision next steps. (See Appendix A for diagram.)

Utilizing a Culture-Based Approach and Framework

It is our collective belief that if we keep in our minds, take to our hearts, and discern through our spirits the medicine wheel teachings shared so far, we will discern the next action. There are four major partners that need to come into the visioning process. A safe space must be created where all may enter in such a way as to enable everyone to see all that is there and not only what they choose to see there. The place, purpose, process, and package must be as transparent as possible to anyone observing this ceremony in both this world and the next.

If this project is to develop the coordination of culturally appropriate Native literacy services in Toronto, the strategy must utilize an Aboriginal culture-based framework. From the beginning, Native literacy programs have been espousing their ability to design and deliver a holistic program model based on medicine wheel teachings. Demystifying the use of this phrase and demonstrating how such a method can be applied may broaden understanding and facilitate the possible adoption of such an approach. All prospective partners must value a culture-based approach, and appreciate the need to clearly articulate and implement these concepts. *"...the concepts behind the medicine wheel, indeed the wheel's very dynamics, describe the profound and complex principles that distinguish First Nations cultures."*[3]

Everything we do must be informed by the medicine wheel teachings. *"Further application requires commitment to allow for emerging and evolving processes based on a continual review and evaluation, revision and reflection on experiences within the literacy field from extensive dialogue in the field of First Nations literacy, and consultations with elders and traditional teachers. There is no beginning or end to the learning process. Our understanding and application of the model has been and continues to be an evolving process."*[4]

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[3] Robert Beaton and Nancy Cooper, "A Culture-Based Approach to Learning: Addressing the Needs of First Nations Adult Learners in Toronto," June 1997

[4] Ibid.

The Eastern Door: Awareness and Vision

Awareness of Native Literacy

In conducting the literacy needs assessment, this project asked practitioners, host agencies, community members, and learners -all four sectors- **"how they found out/became aware of Native Literacy services."** Overwhelmingly, the response was "by word of mouth." This was elaborated upon to detail 'family and friends, community members, Native agencies' in respective order. The top three Native agencies listed as main sources of information about Native literacy services were Council Fire, Native Women's Resource Centre, and the Native Canadian Centre.

No one had heard about the program from a learner, nor had they read a flyer, pamphlet, or newsletter advertising literacy programs and activities. In the community meeting, one participant suggested that programs and staff not spend too much time, energy, and funding on these types of advertising because "it doesn't matter how we advertise it." Our findings indicate that the best method of advertising is by 'word of mouth.' Building informed partnerships would strengthen this method of access and awareness, as does 'in-person' outreach and off=site demonstrations of program applications, a form of mobile literacy.

Practitioners were asked if learners in their program were aware of alternative literacy services. NWRC was the top reply. Four respondents said "none" that they were aware of, and one participant listed the following: Alternative School at Native Child & Family Services, Council Fire, East End Literacy, the Meeting Place, and the Toronto Board of Education.

Most practitioners and community agency representatives who participated in the survey were keenly aware that there are more learners out in the community than are accessing literacy services, and who keep experiencing frustration with other education and training programs due to their lack of literacy skills. When asked, **"How do you know about these other learners?"** their responses were:

- I know about these other learners because they come for information on the literacy program and return months, or a year later, to use the services.
- Some walk in for information on services and return in two to six months or a year later.
- I try to reach others by attending Native functions in order to be highly visible.
- I spread the word about the programs my agency offers.

"If there are learners who have not been involved in Native literacy services, what services do you know they are aware of?"

- Mostly mainstream services.
- None – they use the short-term mainstream courses, e.g., Toronto School of Business. If they don't like it, they try out Native literacy.

"How do you try to reach these learners who clearly need/wish to learn more?" Suggestions included:

- Meals programs
- Relatives of participants

- Attending Native functions
- I spread the word
- Provide as much info and guidance as I can
- Tell them of literacy programs
- Advertising

Most Native agencies not mandated specifically for educational upgrading or training acknowledged that access depended on what the learner's staff contacts know or don't know about the purpose and availability of Native literacy programs and services. If literacy program staff were able to inform more frontline staff of Native agencies with respect to Native literacy programs and services, we would experience a vastly increased number of informed adult learners. One former literacy practitioner stated that both programs provide services adequate to the current numbers using the literacy programs; if there were to be such an influx, either/both programs would need more resources to meet the demand. This adds to the issue of information and referral outside the Native literacy community.

Learners were asked **"What literacy services have you used in Toronto?"** Of the following places listed, most people checked off more than one place.

- Anishnawbe Health Toronto
- Council Fire
- Native Canadian Centre of Toronto
- Native Child & Family Services
- Na-Me-Res
- Native Women's Resource Centre
- The Meeting Place
- Toronto District School Board

Council Fire and the Native Women's Resource Centre were checked off equally. They have both hosted the longest-running full-time Native literacy programs in Toronto. It would seem that learners are most familiar with these program locations. The next most-noted sites were the Native Canadian Centre and the Toronto District School Board, which may be a reference to their six-year partnership with the First Nations Adult Education Project. Other places were mentioned at least once and many were classes offered by the Mobile Literacy Services Project, which ran for one year.

Building a Vision of Native Literacy

Only two community members who could be categorized as current or potential learners attended the community meeting. None of the other past learners who were asked and who had agreed to participate in a discussion panel appeared. As a result, the total number of attendees, participants, and community members at that meeting was six. All were literacy workers, previously or presently involved in teaching.

None of the Native agency representatives present were able to confirm their knowledge of their agency ever participating in a visioning process that determined principles for Native literacy program and service development and delivery in the Greater Toronto Area.

The respondents to the executive directors/steering committee questionnaire thought the visioning process might begin by:

- conducting literacy awareness sessions for Native social-service agencies about the needs of Aboriginal learners;
- conducting more public meetings to bring about greater understanding of what Native literacy is;
- conducting bi-monthly stakeholders' meetings to increase access through greater communication; and
- establishing an advisory committee to help oversee and guide the visioning process.

It was suggested that the advisory committee become a subcommittee of either the Toronto Aboriginal Social Services Association (TASSA) or the Greater Toronto Area Aboriginal Education Council (GTAAEC)[5]. The umbrella group would then take responsibility for overseeing the implementation of the proposed five-year strategy as directed by advisory committee members.

A visioning process that determines what the principles for the development and delivery of Aboriginal literacy programs and services might be in the Greater Toronto Area does need to be undertaken. However, the implementation of such a plan could effect more harm than good if it merely replicates a Western-oriented educational system that failed so many Native learners in the first place.

"To what degree are we designing and delivering programs that perpetuate a deficits-based philosophy? To what extent is a government-developed literacy program compatible with the realities and challenges Native learners face?"[6]

An even more dramatic statement was made at the community meeting: *"The MTCU and LBS outcomes models will never work for Native learners."*[7] This reflects the participants impression that "*Currently, Native literacy programs appear to spend most of their energy coordinating everything to meet the 'jargon of the day' [a reference to the challenges of coping within the mandates of host agencies, meeting LBS learning outcomes and MTCU standards] and wind up building around buildings that people don't show up to. How do we fill empty rooms today?*"[8]

This indicates that there are literacy workers willing to explore change, but such a process necessitates extending the dialogue beyond the circle of practitioners themselves. Participants honoured the elder's words, taking them to heart. He began the day by saying that "Today, an opportunity is being presented, whether it is used or not, for Native community members to take up their responsibility to contribute to shaping the future of Native literacy programs. We will assume that whoever is here is meant to be here… and go ahead with this meeting."

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[5] The Council is no longer active.
[6] Participant, "The Future of Native Literacy Programs and Services," community meeting, October 2000
[7] Ibid.
[8] Ibid.

Defining Native Literacy

"An aboriginally-based program of learning will provide individuals with the opportunity to realize and understand his or her part within the total creation. An understanding of how all the other life forms follow their original instructions both naturally and instinctively provides the basis from which human beings can draw information for their own survival and well-being. Having been given the power of the mind to make choices, human beings must acquire the information they need to not only basically survive, but also to achieve a quality of life where all beings can co-exist in a state of peace, harmony, balance and interdependence. The human being is the only life form which must learn to co-exist."[9]

Coordinating and facilitating community-wide participation in building a vision for Native literacy service delivery in Toronto necessitates a clear articulation of what Native literacy means to this community right now. Ideally, the articulation will incorporate the core values of Aboriginal cultural and spiritual teachings into a program's design and delivery. The part of the community in which each program is located would be responsible for identifying the core values important to their lives and translating them into operating principles. It would also be up to that part of the community to state their expectations and articulate the outcomes and standards of achievement by which success is measured.

While the surveys did not ask learners or practitioners for their definition of Native literacy, the questionnaires for executive directors/steering committee members did include this question. Survey respondents were asked to describe their understanding of Native literacy did so in the following point forms:

- provide an opportunity for Native people to improve literacy skills and also include relevant Native literacy;
- capability/capacity of Native people as proficient readers/writers using the English language and understanding Canadian society;
- community-based, culture-based initiative that includes input from all aspects of the community; and
- there is a need for financial literacy and legal literacy as well as basic literacy.

The answers to the second part of the same question further elaborated the respondents' ideas of what Native literacy must include (for Toronto):

- life skills, Native culture, values;
- learning, understanding Native languages, perspectives, culture, etc.;
- strong awareness and understanding of the issues facing Aboriginal learners;
- strong awareness of curriculum development and implementation;
- basic finances for management of funds; and
- basic knowledge of legal matters.

Participants in the community meeting began their discussions with the concept that Aboriginal people are literate. Those in attendance were predominantly literacy practitioners.

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[9] Diane Hill, "Aboriginal Access to Post-Secondary Education," March 1995

"I could probably tell you stories for three days without reading any written notes or ever writing down what I know...and I know a lot of other people who can do that too."[10]

Native literacy programs and practitioners are in a position to foster respect for Aboriginal oral literacy. This raises the question of the importance of oral literacy and/or literacy in one or more of the First Nations languages. None of the responses among the learners' surveys seemed to connect mother-tongue literacy as being part of Native literacy programs and services. However, literacy practitioners and executive directors/steering committee members did suggest the need for Native languages -oral and written skills- to be included in Native literacy programs.

Toward a Broader Definition of Literacy

Literacy, as described by the major funding source, is essentially the ability to read and write and speak the English language: common staples of working and living in this society. Community-based literacy, workplace literacy, computer literacy, school-based literacy, and family literacy are all based on this framework. Development of a community-wide strategy on Native literacy would mean placing these options into an Aboriginal model of learning; *"a model that does not tell people what they will learn and what they must do."*[11] A successful Native literacy program empowers each learner to reach for more than a grade 12 or college diploma, or a university degree. Learning goals should be about more than acquiring an official piece of paper that provides no guarantee of employment or independence.

"The learning constituting any individual's knowledge base will be more than learning for the purpose of survival and meeting basic needs. The knowledge base that develops as the result of learning ... will also be directly related to the individual's primary 'calling' or purpose in life. Individuals differ in their knowledge base with respect to the individual purpose for which they have been born. All knowledge is valuable and no knowledge base is viewed as being more 'professional' or 'better' than anyone else's. Put another way, the knowledge base possessed by individuals are just simply different, and each individual possesses a part of the 'whole knowledge' of the people."[12]

There are many forms of literacy that are not yet acknowledged by mainstream literacy programs and many other possibilities to explore. All range beyond the scope of this project. Creating the space to explore this dialogue must begin "at home," in the Native community. There is little doubt that if Native agencies fully understood the possibilities inherent in the development and delivery of an Aboriginal-based approach to literacy, collaboration around specific types of projects would begin in earnest.

Other ideas not specifically mentioned in this project's information gathering but raised in the literature reviewed include the following questions and suggestions: What about learning and practicing what is simply a good way to live? Discovering knowledge of *"how to live one's life with meaning and purpose that includes the desire to fulfill that which the spirit is sent into the world to do"*[13]? What about using the seven grandfather's traditional teachings as the principles upon which

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[10]Participant, "The Future of Native Literacy Programs and Services," community meeting, October 2000
[11] Diane Hill, "Aboriginal Access to Post-Secondary Education," March 1995
[12] Ibid.
[13] Diane Hill, "Holistic Learning: A Model of Education Based on Aboriginal Cultural Philosophy," October 1999

Native literacy programs are grounded? What about structuring the program based on medicine wheel teachings in order to meet learners' needs holistically?[14] What about incorporating the three categories of Indigenous knowledge into a literacy program: traditiona; empirical; and revealed?[15] There are many more ideas within the Native community.

What about exploring the findings of other Native practitioners and researchers who have attempted to define and articulate the uniqueness of Native literacy? For example, why not implement the program components highlighted in the *Native Literacy Planning Process,* published by the Ontario Native Coalition, which documents the results of an extensive research project that took three years to finalize due to the amount of community consultation)? Informative reports exist that articulate principles important to the design and delivery of Native literacy programs and services.

"The gifts of respect, relations, reason, and behaviour are manifested as a foundation for a healthy lifestyle – and for healthy literacy programs. These gifts are not just about literacy but also about life. We need to address these issues before we can reach a place that ensures proper program delivery. These gifts, when followed, help build a good path for the learner, the instructor, and for the program or institution."[16]

The Southern Door: Outreach and Relationships

Learner Recruitment, Outreach, and Referrals

Both learners and practitioners were asked how most Native literacy learners find their way to the programs. The predominant reply was "by word of mouth." Most learners heard about the programs first from "family/friends," then through various Native social services/community agencies. Obviously, Aboriginal oral traditions are still strong among urban Aboriginal people.

Of course, in the Native community, the reality is that it is necessary to be linked into the social network of communication in the first place. Potential learners not tied into this community network are not party to the possible opportunities that may present themselves within this setting – and there are great numbers of Aboriginal community members who are not actively involved in the community. They are focused on living in the city and struggling with poverty, a lack of housing, finding and keeping a job, maintaining families, etc.

Most practitioners and agency representatives who participated in the survey were keenly aware that there are more learners in the urban setting not using literacy services, who continue to experience frustration with other education and training programs because of low literacy levels.

Executive directors/steering committee members were asked, **"Do you or your organization (please specify) have any inter-agency strategies to share common outreach, assessment, and referral practices as well as instructor/tutor training?"** AlphaPlus was mentioned as an excellent resource for tutor/instructor training, although they don't train volunteers.

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[14] A common practice most Native agencies follow, whether or not they are involved in Native literacy.
[15] Diane Hill, "Holistic Learning: A Model of Education Based on Aboriginal Cultural Philosophy," October 1999
[16] Robert Beaton and Nancy Cooper, "A Culture-Based Approach to Learning: Addressing the Needs of First Nations Adult Learners in Toronto," June 1997

This question was immediately followed by **"Any ideas?"** There were a number of suggestions for outreach strategies:

- target tenants (Nishnawbe Homes)
- distribute information through TASSA
- reach community through agency outreach workers
- offer evening classes for those who work
- referral
- Frontier College, Ryerson U, George Brown

The next question was, **"Have you or your organization gathered any information to determine specific needs of adult Native learners who are not accessing literacy programs?"** Three organizations indicated no, while two indicated yes. When asked if they were able to share such information, no one responded. One person suggested using a questionnaire or other form to gather information at events e.g. the SkyDome powwow, and suggested a thank-you gift as incentive to fill it in. This particular method was used to gather learner data at the Ryerson powwow. Thirteen previous learners filled out surveys. A backpack full of reference books was raffled off at the end of the day. The staff and two volunteers noticed that most community members tended to steer clear of the literacy booth. Inviting people to come over to the booth solicited reactions such as, "Why? Do I look illiterate to you?" or "What makes you think I'm illiterate?" Obviously, there is still a lot of stigma associated with low literacy levels.

Other ideas included:

- AECCP clients although this program closed earlier this year,
- homeless initiative
- something we can pursue as part of our work here (NWRC)
- talk to learners, elders, and youth; experienced literacy providers to learn from their successes and failures.

This project managed to consult 32 learners; one elder who assisted at the community meeting; and twenty-three experienced literacy providers.

Additionally, executive directors/steering committee members were asked, **"Have you or your organization experienced literacy services actively promoted and encouraged through/in organizations not necessarily dedicated to education or mandate for training?"** Four of the organizations gave no response or said no. Someone recalled that "AECCP received library books around 1995." That was the extent to which the promotion of literacy was noted in a Native agency not necessarily dedicated to education or mandate for training. AECCP was the Aboriginal Employment Career Counselling Program offered out of the Native Canadian Centre until earlier this year.

Practitioners at the community meeting explored the idea that promoting literacy awareness among Native organizations may not necessarily attract or bring in more adult learners.

"It was felt that Native learners are not here [this meeting, or in programs] because they've had years of proof that 'no one's really listening.' We need to focus on what we can do for the learners, not to them."[17]

It appears that Literacy is not a recognized priority in the Native community. There always seem to be other things to deal with first. It appears very few leaders – traditional or not – speak publicly about the need for Native literacy. In fact, a literacy worker at the community meeting recalled hearing one adult learner's experience of being asked by an elder 'why they were wasting their band's money and so much time going to school when they could be working for the community doing something right now.'

How do we create a space for Native literacy? Community agency representatives suggested that word go out through all outreach staff in their respective fields. Another suggested approaching Toronto Association of Social Service Agencies and making arrangements for referrals through the agencies represented.

Question 5 of the survey for executive directors/steering committee members was, **"We plan to initiate a process to improve the coordination of community-wide access to broader resources such as Ningwakwe, AlphaPlus, alternative funding sources, etc. Any preliminary ideas on making access to literacy a Toronto-wide reality?"** Five responses were offered:

- AECCP curriculum
- to get people to attend, offer substantial refreshments
- certificate upon graduation
- graduation ceremony
- approach youth drop-in centres, dentist's offices, health centres, street help, info lines, employment centres

Internet access and an extensive list of quality sites for students and program coordinators was mentioned as a program necessity. It was also suggested that each organization take responsibility for one of the five suggestions appearing above.

In this climate of struggling community service organizations, most agencies or networks are unable to add to their workloads unless they perceive the immediate financial benefit in doing so, at any level. Most agencies are already in competition for the same dollars; ensuring another year's survival has most agencies selectively engaging in partnerships that will not drain their own staff or resources.

[17] Participant, "The Future of Native Literacy Programs and Services," community meeting, October 2000

Building Community Partnerships

If we are to follow the medicine wheel teachings when deciding whom to involve in partnership building, the four key players in our partnership must consist of representatives selected from among the teachers, helpers, guides, and learners in the community. This would also be something to consider when selecting Native community members to be involved with carrying out any of the "next steps" of this project.

Only executive directors/steering committee members were asked, **"Do you have a sense of all the various programs that should be working together to increase access to and retention with Aboriginal literacy and LBS programs in the Toronto area?"** Their responses were split equally between yes and no. One respondent suggested the following agencies be involved: NWRC, Anduhyaun, Na-Me-Res, Pedahbun Lodge, Native Child & Family Services, Native Canadian Centre of Toronto, Spirit of the People, and Two-Spirited People of the First Nations.

The original project proposal suggested that consultations needed to occur with various agencies and groups to develop a vision and a five-year strategy:

- Greater Toronto Area Aboriginal Education Council;
- Metro Toronto Movement for Literacy;
- Current and potential learners in Native literacy programs;
- Ontario Native Literacy Coalition;
- Native service organizations such as Pedahbun Lodge, Anishnawbe Health Toronto, Native Child & Family Services, Spirit of the People, Council Fire, Native Women's Resource Centre, Native Canadian Centre of Toronto and the Native Skills Centre, all represented through the Toronto Aboriginal Social Services Association (TASSA);
- Aboriginal housing services (Nekenaan, Na-Me-Res, Anduhyaun, Wigwamen Homes, Gabriel Dumont Housing, Nishnawbe Homes);
- Toronto District School Board (LBS Program, First Nations Adult Education Project, Alternative School at Native Child & Family Services, Native Curriculum Advisor);
- Native access programs at local colleges (George Brown, Centennial, Seneca);
- university transition programs (U of T, Ryerson, York);
- Toronto community and social-service agencies; and
- local employment agencies (HRDC, Aboriginal delivery mechanisms).

The original project proposal further identified that the three key partners would be GTA-AEC, TASSA, and MTML. To date, at least one representative from each of these three key partners listed has been involved with and/or actively participated in this project.

Not all of the groups on the proposed list have actively participated in the needs assessment or the community visioning process. Of course, some of the agencies listed no longer exist at this time, and others not listed previously have expressed interest in this project and have been contacted.

Types of Partnerships Needed

This project did not review what types of agency partnerships seemed to work best for learners. However, the knowledge gathered by various other short-term projects indicates the need for two kinds of partnerships.

Literacy programs and services geared for learners in crisis e.g., the homeless need to be focused on helping learners prepare for entry into literacy, upgrading, training, or employment programs of their choice. Program settings are usually different e.g., adult drop-ins, shelters, treatment centres, jails, etc. and there needs to be a more immediate and broader range of emergency support services available while learners access literacy services. Learners in this catgegory tend to access drop-in literacy services and engage in several short visits for assistance with specific and immediate tasks or group activities, as opposed to carrying out a longer training plan.

Group learning activities must take into account that the composition of these groups will change from one class to another. Individual goals such as assistance with filling out an application form could be undertaken with the help of instructors and peers; some may wish to begin a supervised learning arrangement until they are ready to spend more time developing their literacy skills. Learners who fail to keep their appointments because of day-to-day crises often frustrate the tutors assigned to this group.

For those learners whose lives are more stable and who may not be actively involved in Native programs generally, literacy programs should build progressively on the learners' strengths toward reaching some identified goal. However, literacy programs should not only be skills-based classes aimed at higher education, further training, and employment, but rather programs that help adults find a path to growth and positive change.

These learners may be ready to take on regularly scheduled classes, beginning with a two-hour class once a week, progressing to perhaps twice that and eventually a full-time program. Learners may not require support services within immediate reach but they should be aware of where they can access such services if required. Tutor/learner matches have a stronger foundation to build on within these parameters.

A highly successful model for the delivery of literacy programs and services to both types of learners was the Mobile Literacy Services Project. The model of delivery used by the First Nations Adult Education Project worked better for those learners whose lives were more stable. In fact, their stated preference was to have all classes offered out of one central location, rather than classes at different sites throughout downtown Toronto. The variety of programming offered via both models seemed adequate, at least as a beginning. Both project reports also document evaluations of the participants; forwarding their suggestions for program changes needed.

The Western Door: Knowledge and Reasoning

Ceremony as Part of the Aboriginal Learning Experience

"[While visiting a literacy program in a northern community] I attended a traditional gathering where I heard how important it was to 'Use your feathers and feast your feathers,' or you'll get sick or weak."[18]

At the community meeting, various participants agreed that there is a need to infuse ceremony into programs, i.e., to share traditional teachings and values, to give recognition, to express thanks, and to assist learners in combating sicknesses such as feeling unable to contribute meaningfully to family and community. The purpose of most Aboriginal ceremonies – whether they are observed individually or communally – is to bring about clarity and meaning.

The inclusion of ceremony – smudging, prayer, talking or healing circles, use of tobacco offerings, feasts and give-aways, sweatlodge ceremonies, and seasonal fasting rituals – contributes to the Native learner's personal development and enhances self-esteem. It also equips attendees with skills relevant to their overall wellbeing. Culture-based practices assist Native learners with the process of self-reflection and critical thinking required for building prior-learning-assessment portfolios, developing communication skills, enhancing interpersonal skills and group effectiveness, goal-setting, time management, oral presentation skills, assertiveness, résumé writing, gaining confidence, etc. Various Aboriginal beliefs and practices exist to help individuals develop responsibility for coping with stress, indecisiveness, lack of motivation, lack of self-esteem, and management of anger or grief. Ceremonies are tools learners can use to develop greater awareness and life-enhancing skills.

"The educational process in an aboriginal learning model endeavours to help the learner develop a broader, more holistic view of self, others and the environment. Learning and teaching activities are designed to provide opportunities for the learner to enhance his or her knowledge, skills, attitudes, and behaviours in a manner that allows the individual to function in a more empowered and balanced way within one's self and outwardly in their behaviour."[19]

The Need for Relevant Learning Experiences

More mainstream education systems are leaning toward using the 'discovery approach.' It is a way of learning or teaching that is familiar to Native people. It is very likely the preferred style of learning of most people, Native or non-Native. The work of Native literacy program practitioners is to help learners discover what they need to know and why they need to know it.

"A grandmother told me she had never met her grandchild and that she probably wouldn't be around long enough to tell him the things she would like to. That was the literacy need. We talked about what she would like to tell him and figured out how she could tell him...so that when he was old enough, he'd have something from her. She started coming to literacy classes everyday, learning whatever

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[18] Participant, "The Future of Native Literacy Programs and Services," community meeting, October 2000
[19] Diane Hill, "Aboriginal Access to Post-Secondary Education," March 1995

she needed to. She began learning to read and write in order to give him something. The literacy program helped fill that need. The payoff included meeting her emotional and spiritual needs."[20]

Practitioners are reluctant to offer learners guarantees of employment based on increased mainstream literacy levels. The program or teacher has no control over the economy, nor can they guarantee employment. For most learners, the concept of literacy, education, and training implies that change is possible, even desirable, however carries no guarantee of actualization.

The Native community has heard about Jenny Horsman's story: how a literacy student took time out of a literacy program to take advantage of a job opening in a local textile factory. For two or three weeks, she was able to fulfill the tasks required of her position. However, the employer dismissed her as soon as he found someone with a grade 12 diploma, even though the job obviously did not require a grade 12 diploma. The student returned to her literacy classes disheartened by her experience.[21]

Literacy programs and practitioners assist learners to define "what counts." What is really important to know and be able to do? What must the knowledge and skill- base of each learner actually be, in order for them to meet their specific goals? For a Native person, those goals may include more than a job. The goals might be to:

- attend adult upgrading;
- obtain a grade 12 diploma;
- enter training for a specific line of work;
- find meaningful and gainful employment;
- become a more active community member;
- fulfill their clan responsibilities; or
- fulfill their spiritual destiny.

The best thing practitioners can do is create a supportive learning environment with enough space for learners to explore alternative ways and means of acquiring the knowledge and skill base needed to meet specific goals – and provide the learning experiences and supports to help learners get there.

There is a demonstrated need for programs that assist learners with the development of the knowledge and skills required to cope with various situations that might arise in a mainstream academic or employment environment. Native learners, especially, need to be able to determine their rights and responsibilities, and how to access or create avenues for dealing with the tensions and conflicts that may arise in a cross-cultural setting. Native learners may well find themselves being the only Aboriginal person in their class, program, or workplace. Programs must somehow empower learners with the tools to be informed and resourceful students, trainees, employees, and community members.

Another element of design and delivery of a community-based and learner-centred literacy program is to encouragelearners to identify and articulate their individualized needs. In the community meeting, one of the participants detailed the difficulty of creating opportunities for

[20] Participant, "The Future of Native Literacy Programs and Services," community meeting, October 2000
[21] Ibid.

learners to define how programs might better serve their needs. "It's like asking them to self-diagnose and self-prescribe," one participant said. One staff was told by a learner that "he wasn't going to do her work for her."

"Western methods of schooling have greatly impacted and influenced the process of learning not only for aboriginal people, but also for all people in general. Programs of learning that are based on western models and understanding do not contribute to the development of the whole person. In fact, for aboriginal people, the experience of another culture's values, beliefs, principles, and practices simply confuses aboriginal learners and moves them further away from their own cultural roots, heritage and identity."[22]

Native literacy practitioners are faced with the challenges created by the historical impact of Western culture and the effects of systemic oppression internalized by the Native community. A Native literacy program can be the place where learners 'unlearn' attitudes and beliefs associated with Western cultural values and oppressive practices related to education and learning in general; as part of creating a suitable foundation. Literacy becomes a tool for personal and community development.

The Northern Door: Program Design and Delivery Issues

Native Literacy Delivery Models

"I don't know how I would survive being illiterate in this city. They've figured out how. If you've learned how to live without literacy for 19-some years, you have got skills. That takes a lot of skills."[23]

The essential core of any successful Native literacy program is respect. There must be a process of ensuring respect for each learner; who they are and what they know. There is a need to move away from the failure-based education system inherited by colonized peoples. When developing programs and evaluating Native learners by the standards of another culture, Native literacy practitioners must determine the extent to which their particular program is compatible with the realities and challenges faced by Native learners.

"The gifts of respect, relations, reason, and behaviour are manifested as a foundation for a healthy lifestyle – and for healthy literacy programs. These gifts are not just about literacy but also about life. We need to address these issues before we can reach a place that ensures proper program delivery. These gifts, when followed, help build a good path for the learner, the instructor, and for the program or institution."[24]

Learning experiences must build on a learner's previous knowledge and augment the foundations of skills already in place. Respected learners can independently select and determine their preferred areas of study if they can define or comprehend the rationale for development of various literacy skills.

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[22] Diane Hill, "Aboriginal Access to Post-Secondary Education," March 1995
[23] Ibid.
[24] Robert Beaton and Nancy Cooper, " A Culture-Based Approach to Learning: Addressing the Needs of First Nations Adult Learners in Toronto," June 1997

The most successful programs recognize the financial challenges and economic realities of their learners. Programs that offer financial supports such as transportation and/or childcare assistance, refreshments or a meal, an allowance, allow learners to attend programs more consistently. While no literacy wishes to believe their learners' primary motivation for learning is the receipt of an allowance, programs must offer such basic supports to make learning a more feasible option. Every literacy program attendee must be given opportunities to learn that which will enhance their personal and professional growth, no matter where they come from, why they're here, or where they aim to go.

Some Positive Responses For Current Native Literacy Programs

Learners who attended the two focus groups were asked to identify some positive things about the literacy programs they were attending. Responses were jotted down in point form to encourage the flow of discussion. They are presented here in the same manner, without specifying program, unless the speaker indicated. Literacy practitioners and program assistants and teachers were also present at the meeting.

- flexibility, everyone goes at own pace
- someone to be there when I get stuck
- people and space at NWRC are homey
- family & friends & shelter
- helped get GED – college preparation
- computers good – step by step – show instruction
- tokens for travel and childcare a necessity; eating here a necessity too
- addictions, counselling, and mom's and children's programs enhances the likelihood of completing and staying in literacy programs
- Native-specific program helped – more comfy with family and friends now
- cultural component – acceptance of mainstream and Aboriginal backgrounds important – better balance – better learning
- combined literacy program for families excellent – both can learn at the same time – good bonding too
- family literacy – includes outings, use of physical and motor skills
- holistic better – builds security, self-esteem of four areas of self
- NWRC gives "a push, a tug, or a pull" – loving, compassionate, especially moms, caregivers, children's groups – encouragement

How Holistic are Current Native Literacy Programs?

Learners and practitioners were asked whether **"literacy services in Toronto [are] serving whole person needs of the learner. In other words, is learning approached including the spiritual, emotional, mental, and physical aspects of health and wellness? (For example, do they address issues other than just the mental aspects of literacy, such as child care, physical health, etc.)"** Fifty-eight per cent of learners -14 out of 24- said yes, and only 20 per cent of practitioners - two out of 10- agreed that the learner's whole-person needs were being met. These two workers further explained their answer by saying: "NWRC attempts to address [physical, mental, emotional,

spiritual] – mainstream programs wouldn't attempt it," and "Hopefully, it provides from a culturally sensitive [perspective] and four-directions/natures are included and integrated." Six out of 10 practitioners explained their negative response:

- Curriculum – no, but from other services available at Council Fire it's up to the individual to seek the services or use them.
- No – mostly mental.
- Not directly in curriculum but provided through other programs throughout Council Fire.
- It is not part of our curriculum but we do try to incorporate it into our class. We touch on all the aspects but it is up to the staff what they bring to the class.
- Growing need to meet more diverse programs – since this is a Native program, [should] include that, but also introduce different cultures and learning styles.
- The programs and services are too sporadic in their mandate because too many programs serve for too many reasons.

In the community meeting, the elder presented another medicine wheel teaching to illustrate the four major areas of learners' needs, which a holistic learning program would have to address (see Appendix B). His teaching provided direct relation to experiences shared by literacy workers of the most effective teaching and learning methods used with Aboriginal learners. It is widely recognized that the ideal learning environement embraces the learner's spirit, body, mind, and emotions. Creating a safe arena for learners to explore new learning experiences on all these levels as they apply to the fulfillment of practical needs, embues relevance to gaining knowledge and skills, so that the learner's ability to retain and use new information is enhanced.

Learning-program staff must be aware of trhe variety of learning styles in any classroom setting. Practitioners must be able to provide a wide range of opportunities for learners to experience holistic learning, ensuring the success of a greater number of learners -an important aspect in a community concerned with the success of the group- in addition to the success of the individual. Allowing learning to englage in peer tutoring and peer mentoring furhter empowers them to take responsibility and control of their own educational experiences.

When the executive directors/steering committee members were asked in their survey to identify **"already-existing resources in relation to Aboriginal needs assessments, students, and practitioner needs/voices particularly relating to literacy and basic skills,"** only the AlphaPlus Centre mentioned having such resources available.

Lastly, survey participants were asked whether they had **"Any other questions you think should be included in a further draft of this survey?"** Three respondents mentioned:

- location of program;
- times of program – morning, afternoon, evening; and
- cost.

Barriers to Access

Learners were asked **"How are/were you able to financially support yourself while in a literacy program?"** The two top responses -seven out of 24 each- were 'own finances,' followed by a combined group who referred to 'general welfare assistance.'

The next two questions were directed at learners and practitioners alike: **"If you were able to participate in literacy services in the Toronto area, please rank by order of importance what was the biggest hurdle for you."** The largest hurdle cited by learners was the lack of financial including TTC fares and childcare, followed by a lack of family/spousal support, and finally, a lack of knowledge about programs in Toronto. Practitioners' responses identified lack of financial and childcare support and that it seemed to be the biggest hurdle learners faced, followed by the lack of knowledge about other programs available, then the lack of family/spousal support.

The responses indicate that both learners and practitioners are aware of the lack of financial and childcare support and that this lack presented a huge barrier to accessing literacy programs and services. The remaining key barriers were perceived in different order.

"If you were not able to participate in the literacy services in the Toronto area, please rank by order of importance what was the biggest hurdle for you." Potential learners said their largest barrier was lack of financial support. Next, there was a tie amongst lack of childcare support, lack of knowledge about programs in Toronto, and other responses including work, other responsibilities and poor time management.

Practitioners also said that lack of financial and childcare support were the largest barriers potential learners would have to face. They next identified lack of knowledge as a deterrent to consistent program participation, then geography, meaning the physical location of the program.

Learners who participated in the two focus groups also identified barriers to access. Responses were jotted down during the meeting in point form. The barriers have been grouped into three categories:

Physical Barriers

- Aboriginal community spread out across GTA – no catchment
- Mississauga, Burlington, Etobicoke – walking isn't an option
- people with disabilities

Emotional/Mental Barriers

- students need to be honoured as adult learners
- adults already come to the literacy classroom with various levels of knowledge about numerous things, but don't feel like they are being honoured for what they already bring to the table (previous knowledge/experience)
- fear of learning, abuse, going outside, belittlement, [think] things will go badly, no hope
- "If you feel low about yourself, you're not going to want to learn"
- "If you have a broken leg, you can't walk"

Other Program Concerns

- attendance is an issue
- be welcoming in a gentle way
- more people need to know about this program
- wish GED can be done directly here instead of through [other places]
- some literacy students are in other groups (e.g., computers) so have a greater or lesser workload, although all are receiving approximately the same literacy work

Literacy Instructors and Volunteers/Tutors

Generally, 54 per cent of the learners -13 out of 24- say that there are currently enough literacy workers available to complete necessary program activities. Of course they noted that should there be an increase, this might not hold true. No information was collected regarding the numbers of learners served by either or both Native Literacy programs. Other comments learners made were:

- I started my literacy work when I was a student for my GED at NWRC. Even though I'm now a student at Council Fire, I'm still involved or can access any services I need at NWRC. The literacy program has been a great support system for me during my learning journey.
- There is plenty of help throughout the communities.
- The low number of workers is due to the lack, or seeming lack of interest in such programs.
- Not enough workers in the community for non-status Natives.
- I found the staff very willing and open to help anyone with math or English and all their programs included traditional teachings.
- You only need one or two volunteers in the literacy program.
- For the moment, there is enough staff. However, if more people utilize these programs, there will be a shortage.
- Need more staff with computer training.

Fifty-five per cent of practitioners -6 out of 11- said there were not enough workers in their programs to meet learners' needs. There appeared to be few to no volunteers providing program assistance outside tutoring activities. More funding is required for volunteer and instructor training. Attracting and supporting volunteers would require additional regular staff to coordinate, train, supervise, and recruit. Practitioners acknowledge that volunteers also usually require financial assistance e.g., TTC fares to travel back and forth to assist the program. More funding is needed for instructors to conduct practitioner training and to secure the servcies of a curriculum developer.

Executive directors/steering committee members were asked, **"What is your knowledge of practitioner needs to increase access and retention of learners in the various programs in the Toronto area?"** One person admitted to having no knowledge of what this entails and three others identified that practitioners must work from their own cultural, spiritual perspective; develop the student's self-esteem, sense of identity, and a positive sense of self, and; develop an achievable educational plan with short and long-term goals.

Concerns in this area were expressed by learners who attended the two focus groups, as did the participants in the community meeting. Participants in the community meeting emphasized the importance of recruiting the most suitable teachers and training them well. The Native community must articulate the quality of teaching preferred prior to consulting the LBS guidelines. Following these comments, various other questions were raised. How do we ensure that our chosen teachers have integrity, have earned the respect of learners, and are prepared to make a long-term commitment? How much is the community prepared to invest in building these resources so teachers become professionals who will always contribute to the community? Increasing the number of teachers and ensuring their ongoing professional training would become easier if funders provided more professional development days so teachers could be hired and trained without draining program administration dollars.

The next two focus group questions concern literacy program staff and volunteers/tutors. Responses were jotted down in point form to encourage the ongoing flow of discussion. Comments about literacy program teachers, whether paid or volunteer:

- not enough workers in literacy department
- teaching style is not very interesting
- communication gaps between literacy programmer and students
- volunteer/teacher possibly not trained directly for this job
- teacher is not approachable, positive, nor do they have a sense of humour
- teacher is teaching only to one level, whereas students are at various levels of reading and writing
- no adaptation/accommodation for advanced students who are getting bored
- more staff needed in this program who can check up on you in an empowering way
- practitioners need to go to learners in community, shelters, etc.

Comments on program use of volunteers/tutors:

- some days there are enough
- every day there – consistently
- volunteers needed there more than [current] literacy staff
- yes, need more volunteers who are available more often
- volunteers need to follow through, show up; they are not trained to suit the needs of half the cases

Program Needs and Funding Concerns

Learner surveys included one question regarding the adequacy of program funding. **"As far as you know, does the program function with enough funding to serve the students who need the services? For example, are there enough travel funds, computers, desks, child care, etc."** Sixty-seven per cent of the learners said no. They identified some program needs that they felt were most likely linked to the level of funding received by the program. They are grouped here by content.

Childcare and Transportation

- child care – need more, every day
- child care is an issue – not long enough or at the right times
- the daycare should be open more often and be available to more people
- daycare – those who have a job are caught in a Catch-22, because the more money they make, the more gets deducted for child care, so the learner never ends up on top
- need more $ – better training for workers, childcare and transportation funding
- does not apply to me but I believe more childcare services are required
- need for more child care
- need funds for transportation
- need more transportation tokens

Computers

- not enough computers available for the learners
- need more computers, desks, and organizing time
- seriously need more space for learners, for storage, computer access, etc.
- to have computers for students who want to study math or English.
- need more computer/Internet access
- computer, Internet – need easy access
- more computers

Financial Supports

- welfare
- paid before for attending the program; not now
- more job opportunities for learners are needed
- finances – need more support while in literacy program
- many students have no financial support – yet they are hoping for their independence by going through literacy. How can this be solved?

Other Supports

- I'd like to see more traditional teachings (more Native cultural components)
- need more reference material and resources
- more Native books

Literacy practitioners were asked nine survey questions regarding funding and financial issues. In response to **"How are most of your learners financially able to support themselves while in a literacy program?"** most practitioners indicated that most learners survived on some form of social assistance while they attended the program, such as disability benefits or welfare. Few learners received EI while participating in a literacy program. The next source of learner income was money received from the band/reserve, if the learner is a status Indian. The third major grouping listed was 'their own finances.'

"Is financial support for your program enough to suit the learner's needs?" Seventy-three per cent of practitioners -8 out of 11- said no, others added:

- money is needed for instruction and child care

- need more accessible funding
- need continuity of funding
- need permanent position, not short contract positions
- could use a bit more financial support to upgrade the program to compete with today's technology. However, the financial support we do receive is enough to get by and the students are benefitting.

"What do you base your answer on? For example, is it from observation, or have you done any formal surveys/interviews in your organization at a previous time?" Sixty-four per cent of practitioners –7 out of 11- said their previous answer was either based on observation or on interviews, surveys, one-to-one personal tutoring, or from providing child care for the literacy program.

When asked where most of the financial support for their program came from, about 50 per cent of the practitioners said from HRDC/Miziwe Biik Employment and Training. Twenty per cent said other funders. Another 20 per cent gave no response and 10 per cent mentioned the Ministry of Training, Colleges, and Universities.

Practitioners were also asked the frequency of their respective funding support sources. Twenty per cent indicated that funding was provided annually. Sixty per cent of practitioners said funding was offered through various funders but did not specify how frequently. One person said funding was offered every two years and one other gave no response.

Practitioners were asked, **"How often and under what conditions must financial support be given in order to achieve optimum success for your program and learners? In other words, how would you prefer money to come into your organization for optimal success of the program and its learners?"** Their replies were:

- tokens/childcare/living expenses
- I don't have enough knowledge of the flow of money to and from our program to answer this question.
- I am new to this program and I don't know exactly know the financial situation of the program.
- Every year, the funders should take a look at what the program is lacking, for example, textbooks and computers, and keep the program up to date and running on good terms that benefit the students.
- There's not really a whole lot more you can provide to the students. We help out as much as we can, and Council Fire's First Nations Skills Development and Training also provides a lot of other services from which they benefit.

Practitioners also raised the following needs and concerns:

- childcare services for students
- tokens/bus passes
- tokens/childcare/living expenses
- not so many complications when applying for funding – not too many attachments
- stability: easier for participants to plan and staff can afford to develop skills

- sufficient financial support and incentives for participants
- linkages and recognition of program by mainstream to make transition easier
- followup support for participants

"Are there any other financial issues you wish to discuss with respect to your learners?" Responses to this question included:

- tokens/childcare/living expenses
- transportation and child care – one less worry
- financial compensation associated with effort assists students with a sense of accomplishment and pride (wage-based and bonuses)
- being paid resulted in more attendance but not inner desire for commitment to learning

The last question in this series was, **"As far as you know, does the program function with enough funding to serve the learners who need their services?"** To this query, about 50 per cent of the practitioners said no and indicated more funding was required to support instructors, training, and development of curriculum.

Learners had two opportunities in the surveys to speak about program funding. They were asked, **"As far as you know, does the program function with enough funding to serve the students who need the services?"** Sixty-seven per cent -16 out of 24- said no, while only 17 per cent said yes.

This concludes the queries raised in the questionnaires with respect to sources of literacy program funding, how often it is/should be received, what else is needed for programs to enhance learners' access to Native literacy programs and services, and what would assist the staff in doing so.

Program Accreditation and Articulation

How should Native literacy programs relate to mainstream educational systems? Native literacy programs are not empowered to issue credits as mainstream high schools. Nor are they particularly geared to assist learners in pursuit of a General Education Diploma. Literacy programs do not specifically prepare learners for college or university. Such preparation requirements exceed the literacy mandate as defined by MTCU. As a result, some Native agencies, community members, and potential learners are skeptical about potential, long-term usefulness.

Conclusions of the Project Findings

According to most Aboriginal traditional teachings,we have a shared responsibility to work together in order to leave this world a better place for the next seven generations. This is a tremendous reponsibility. How we use make use of this choice is up to each one of us to decide. That will be the point of distinction among us.

Over the past 13 years, Native literacy programs and services in Toronto have continuously evolved, like the intertwining spirals of change inherent in the movement around a medicine wheel.

Many literacy workers, Native and non-Native, have worked to promote increasing awareness of Native literacy needs. Their ongoing experiments in birthing Aboriginal-based approaches to Native adult learning have contributed to the Native literacy programs and services we have today.

Native literacy is a model of education based on a philosophy for transformative learning. To implement such a model would require that we rise collectively as the possessors of ancient wisdom to take our place in the circle of learning in a good way to fulfill our prophecies. It may be that we can only pave the way, in a warrior-like fashion, for those coming behind us – our youth and children. Perhaps, all we can do is pass on the best from our bundles (resources), so the power of the gifts buried in our collective minds, hearts, and spirits will have room to expand. Let us seek that vision together.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In sincere acknowledgement of the previously accomplished work of other Native literacy workers, and to pay our respects to their efforts, we make the following statement: whatever recommendations previously made to guide the development and delivering of learning programs to First Nations adults, be included as the Toronto Native community takes up the responsibility of determining what Native literacy means to this community. We must never forget where we have come from, nor what we have learned, especially from those who first walked the path.

The following is a list of recommendations offered in the spirit of furthering the learning journey of Native adults who travel the long road toward the establishing justice and equity for all First Nations people.

Immediate

It is recommended that each agency that hosts a native literacy program must ensure that the program continues to evolve to meet the literacy needs of the population served and the agency must provide adequate resources and support for these programs in order to:

- enhance coordination, articulation, and transition between Native literacy programs and other community stakeholders;
- support the development of partnerships in developing and delivering Native literacy services; and
- improve the definition and availability of distinct Native literacy programming throughout Toronto.

The findings of the needs assessment provide enough information for Native literacy programs to begin and/or continue building the inter-agency strategy and community-wide partnerships needed in order to enhance access to Native literacy programs and services. The project goals originally stated for this project need to be revisited in collaboration with current interested stakeholders and community members as part of developing a proposed vision and action plan for this community. As suggested in the initial proposal, our findings confirm the need for:

- Greatly increased awareness of, support for, and participation in Native literacy services in Toronto.
- Initiation of partnerships addressing an inter-agency strategy.
- Development of a commonly understood protocol for assessment and referral.

- A clearly proposed and prioritized list of recommended initiatives; projects, new positions, avenues for funding and other resources.
- A foundation for innovative partnerships and shared resources.
- Coordination of access channels through a common protocol.
- Increased choice for learners and potential learners.

Long-term

1. It is recommended that a steering committee be formed, consisting of four to sixteen representatives from the Toronto Aboriginal community, recruited and selected from the four key sectors identified through medicine wheel teachings as teachers, helpers, guides, and learners.

2. It is recommended that the steering committee coordinate the continuation of a community-wide visioning process that develops guiding principles, which will then guide the development, design, and delivery of a five-year strategy for Aboriginal learning programs in the Greater Toronto Area.

3. It is recommended that the sterring committee ensure that the foundation of such a strategy is rooted in an Aboriginal culture base that meets Aboriginal learners' needs by facilitating Native ownership of Native learning.

4. It is recommended that the steering committee develop a project proposal, including an activity and evaluation plan, with a budget guided by a community vision that articulates the key elements to be addressed in the delivery and development of Aboriginal learning programs.

5. It is recommended that the steering committee conduct research into Aboriginal culture-based learning and teaching models for the purposes of designing a framework and creating, in consultation with the Toronto Native community, an Aboriginal Learning Centre that meets the learning requirements of Native learners.

6. It is recommended that the steering committee pilot the Aboriginal learning and teaching models in order to bring about the achievement of the five-year strategy and action plan for Native learning as intended at the outset of this project.

7. It is recommended that the steering committee create a feasible action plan that will assist with the evolution of the five-year strategy plan within an Aboriginal culture-based framework that will sustain an holistic Aboriginal learning approach.

8. It is recommended that the learning approach empower Aboriginal learners to develop an appreciation of the lifelong learning process as they develop the knowledge and skills required in order to discern what the Creator has intended for them.

9. It is recommended that the learning approach enhance Aboriginal learners' abilities to carry out their life roles and responsibilities in a good way, through a joy of lifelong learning.

10. It is recommended that the action plan include provisions for a centrally located office in downtown Toronto, accessible to both female and male Native learners, that acts as the home base for the steering committee's administrative assistant, and with a team of helpers consisting of an Aboriginal program coordinator, two Aboriginal outreach workers, and an Aboriginal support worker.

11. It is recommended that the Aboriginal support worker be responsible for carrying out the day-to-day work of local planning and other activities that will result in the development of a community vision and establish some guiding principles upon which the five-year strategy and action plan will be based.

12. It is recommended that the Aboriginal support worker secure a foundation for establishing Aboriginal learning programs by facilitating the clear articulation of Native learning outcomes and the development of community-based partnerships crucial to addressing the needs of Native learners.

13. It is recommended that the Aboriginal support worker develop and deliver recruitment and intake processes, a common assessment and referral protocol, and Aboriginal culture-based training and follow-up models that utilize a support/team approach consisting of a team coordinator, six to 12 instructor trainees, and various community partners (Native and non-Native agencies) integral to creating a supportive learning environment conducive to Aboriginal learners' development, healing, and wellness.

14. It is recommended that the Aboriginal support worker assemble Native-specific learning and teaching resources (e.g., spiritual, physical, material, human, emotional, mental) that use holistic learning models relevant to the actualization of Aboriginal learners'goals.

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APPENDIX A

Medicine Wheel Presented by Athol Hart
Community Meeting, October 21

Envisioning The Future of Native Literacy Programs and Services

APPENDIX B

Medicine Wheel Presented by Athol Hart
Community Meeting, October 21

Envisioning The Future of Native Literacy Programs and Services

(Wholistic Learning Experiences Must Address Learners' Needs)